

H.E.R.M.E.S.

Autumnal Equinox 2009



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H.E.R.M.E.S.' PURPOSE:

§ 1: To advance and balance the Academic Study of Esotericism.

§ 2: To establish and maintain an international and interdisciplinary Academic Research Society in the field of Esotericism in relation to Religion, Philosophy, Science and Art.

INTRODUCTION

Even though H.E.R.M.E.S. was conceptualized in the year 2000 and launched on the internet in 2004 we have as yet had no official newsletter. I am therefore happy to finally present the first H.E.R.M.E.S. newsletter. As with H.E.R.M.E.S., the newsletter will presumably progress slowly, but steadily, towards its future horizon and I hereby invite everyone to contribute to its future pages. Preferably the articles should to some extent reflect the purposes of H.E.R.M.E.S., but it is in no way mandatory. It is our aim to cover some of the following topics related to H.E.R.M.E.S. and esotericism in general:

- News related to H.E.R.M.E.S. (updates on the website, events, publications, new articles, etc.)
- Short articles on esoteric topics.
- News in relation to conferences - promotion and experiences
- New books, journals, websites, reviews
- New organizations, University developments in relation to esotericism, etc.
- Interviews
- Artworks

The current idea is to publish and distribute the newsletter in a biannual cycle: at the spring equinox and at the autumnal equinox. You can contribute to the newsletter by forwarding all relevant news in relation to the above topics to the following email address: contact@h-e-r-m-e-s.org .

If you think other topics might be relevant please let us know.

In the not too distant future, I foresee some extensive additions to the webpage with regard to esoteric information related to the main categories: ‘Esotericism and History’, ‘Methodology’ and ‘The Nature of Esotericism’ as it is my hope that this webpage will evolve into a comprehensive source for *quality* information in relation to esotericism on the internet, where too much unsubstantiated information seem to fluctuate.

The newsletter will hopefully facilitate the exchange of ideas between the members of H.E.R.M.E.S. as well as provide a condensed form of the contents of the webpage for people with an interest in esotericism.

Sincerely yours,

Tim Rudbøg, *Director of H.E.R.M.E.S.*



A Short Comment on the Equinox Cycles

The H.E.R.M.E.S. Newsletter will be issued at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes (archetypically occurring around March 20/21 and September 22/23 each year). These classical names “vernal” and “autumnal” are derived from the Latin *ver* = *spring* and *autumnus* = *autumn*. Astronomically the Equinoxes represent the two points of intersection of the ecliptic and the equator. In contrast to the winter and summer solstices, when night is

longer than day (winter) and when day is longer than night (summer), the two equinoxes are characterized by an equally long day and night. During the vernal equinox, however, darkness is in decline and during the autumnal equinox light is in decline.

The path of the sun around the Earth, from a geocentric perspective, and the rise and decline of light was, especially in ancient times, deeply related to the rhythm of nature, the initiatory path of the human soul and the fight between good and evil or light and darkness.

Astrologically the archetypical sign for the Vernal equinox is Aries and for the autumnal equinox it is that of Libra. In relation to nature Aries represents a new beginning and the return of life from darkness whereas Libra represents the balancing of the forces of Light and Darkness before the dark cycle draws the life force back into itself. In relation to spirit Aries often represented the first step on the initiatory path or spirit's descent into the world of matter whereas Libra represents the waypoint for the upward climb out of matter back into unity with spirit.

Thus the *cyclic time* represented by the two Equinoxes have been deemed fit as creative focal points for issuing the H.E.R.M.E.S. Newsletter, both for its symbolic value and for its natural beauty.



NEWS RELATED TO H.E.R.M.E.S.

WORK AREAS:

H.E.R.M.E.S. still needs support in the following areas:

- Website construction - advanced level
- Fund raising
- Networking agent

If you want to contribute and fill up one or more of the above positions please let us know.

PUBLIC PROFILES ON H.E.R.M.E.S.:

It is now possible to have your member profile uploaded on the website: your profile will be located here

<http://www.h-e-r-m-e-s.org/memberprofiles.htm>

If you want to have a public online member profile on the H.E.R.M.E.S. website please email me with your information and a picture (if you prefer) and we will upload it.

CONFERENCES

Recent:

Esotericism Panel at EASR Conference Messina (Italy)

EASR conference devoted to "Religion in the History of European Culture"

Panel: 'The presence of esoteric currents and ideas in Italy from the 18th century to our days'

Convenor: Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam)

Location: Messina, Italy

Dates: 14-17 September 2009

Upcoming:

Exploring the Extraordinary

Date: Saturday, 31st October, 2009

Location: W/222, Department of Sociology, University of York, UK

Host Organization: Anomalous Experiences Research Unit

<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/soci/research/aeru.htm>

Cost: Tickets £15 (£10 concessions)

Speakers include:

Tamlyn Ryan, University of York: 'Cyberpsychics: Subjective experiences of psychic readings on the internet';

David Luke, University of Greenwich: 'Discarnate entities and dimethyltryptamine (DMT): Psychopharmacology, phenomenology and ontology';

Paul Cowdell, University of Hertfordshire: 'Spirits and spirits: Seeing ghosts under the influence';

Tony Hegarty, Liverpool John Moores University: 'Ambassadors of spirit';

Ian Kidd, University of Durham: 'Science, pseudoscience and the demarcation problem';

Chris Roe, University of Northampton: 'Reproducing anomalous experiences in the laboratory: A review of some recent research developments in parapsychology'.

Members of the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit

<http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/soci/research/aeru.htm> established Exploring the Extraordinary in 2007 at the University of York, with the aim of creating a supportive researcher network that would encourage interdisciplinary links and discussions regarding the study of extraordinary experiences. By 'extraordinary' we refer to experiences that are considered by the experients to be beyond the mundane, having significant spiritual or life changing connotations. We include experiences that have been called supernatural, paranormal, mystical,

transcendental, exceptional, spiritual, and religious, as well as the belief systems such experiences may connect to.

A meal will be organized at a local restaurant in the evening for those wishing to stay over in York on Saturday night. For further details and registration information please contact Hannah Gilbert at heg104@york.ac.uk.

To join Exploring the Extraordinary, please visit our jiscmail list - <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=EXPLORINGTHEEXTRAORDINARY>



American Academy of Religion (AAR) Annual Conference

Dates: 7-10 November 2009

Location: Montréal, Québec, Canada

Two sessions under the rubric of Western Esotericism:

- *From Esoteric to Exoteric: Supernatural and Demonic Manifestations in Popular Culture*
- *Intersections of Science and Esotericism*



Satanism in the Modern World

Dates: 19-20 November 2009

Location: The Department of Archaeology and Religious Studies, The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway.



Esotericism, Magic and Radicalism

Dates: 17-20 June 2010

Location: Kellogg Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

Host Organizations: ASE, Societas Magica, and JSR (*Journal for the Study of Radicalism*)

Call for Papers: Deadline is 15 December 2009

The many and varied associations between esoteric religion, magic, and radical politics are all more urgently in need of study in an era of rapidly increasing globalization. However these associations are not new, and indeed have a long and complex history. The connections between esoteric religions and politics

may be specular and fantastic (as in the accusations of conspiracy so often leveled at witches and heretics), or may be very real (as with the movement led by the Franciscan Bernard Délicieux to suppress the inquisition against the Cathars in Southern France; Bernard was later accused of political sorcery himself). From early Gnostic movements to Rosicrucianism to recent movements like Traditionalism and its offshoots, figures and groups within Western esotericism have been seen, variously, as progressive, conservative, or radical. Many esoteric movements, groups, and individuals have tended either to gain some autonomy from normative religious or political institutions, or to set themselves up as a rarefied elite within such institutions through their beliefs and practices. Often, such figures, groups, or movements are much more complex in their political dimensions than it may at first appear.

Although paper and panel proposals on the whole gamut of themes and topics under the rubric of Western esotericism will be considered, as outlined below, there is a particular interest in providing a venue to explore the interconnections between esotericism and various political and social movements. What are the political associations of figures and groups within Western esotericism? What does it mean to say that a given figure or group within Western esotericism is “radical”? How have charges of magical practice been allied with political accusations against minority groups, and in what ways? We expect that most papers will offer insight into some aspect of the history of Western esotericism, but we also are interested in papers from sociological, anthropological, literary critical or other academic approaches with an eye to political implications or controversies.

There are multiple publishing opportunities associated with the conference. We will publish a subsequent volume in our ASE book series *Studies in Esotericism*, on the conference theme of *Esotericism and Politics*, and some papers may also be accepted as articles in *JSR: Journal for the Study of Radicalism* or the journal *Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* affiliated with the *Societas Magica*.

We encourage submission of proposals for articles on subjects that belong to one or more of the following general categories:

1. Esotericism in Antiquity: Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Platonism
2. History of Magic and Magical Practices from Antiquity to the Present
3. Medieval and Renaissance Esotericism
4. Early Modern Esotericism in Europe and North America;
 - a. alchemy, astrology; the history of science, technology, magic, and medicine
 - b. folk magical traditions in North America (Pennsylvania Dutch, Appalachian, and other forms)
5. Nineteenth Century Forms of Esotericism: History of Magic and Secrecy in Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Music, or Art
6. Twentieth Century Forms of Esotericism: History of Art, Literature, Music,

- Philosophy, Religion, Magic
7. New Religious Movements and the Contemporary Study of Esotericism
 8. Asian Influences on European and North American forms of Esotericism
 9. Methods and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism
 10. Other paper subjects that pertain to Western esotericism, including the history of mysticism.

Scholars from a wide range of perspectives are welcomed, including anthropology, American studies, art history, history, history of religions, literature, philosophy, religious studies, sociology – the full range of academic disciplines and fields that bear upon this area of study. Papers should approach subjects analytically. This is an interdisciplinary field of research, and it is believed everyone will benefit from the cross-fertilization of perspectives. Also of interest are panel discussions on interdisciplinary approaches to the field. For information on how to submit a proposal go to www.aseweb.org



Hidden in Plain Sight: The Influence of Western Esoteric Movements on Modern Thought

A Conference for Scholars and Practitioners

Dates: 22-25 July 2010

Location: Rosicrucian Park in San Jose, CA, USA

Host Organization: Rosicrucian Order, AMORC

Cost: No set conference fee. Suggested donation of \$75.00 per participant at the door to help defray conference costs.

Deadline for submission of proposals: October 1st, 2009

For submission details, [click here](#).

For more information, contact librarian@rosicrucian.org

2010 will mark the 300th anniversary of the publication of *The True and Complete Preparation of the Philosopher's Stone of the Fraternity of the Golden and Rosy Cross* by Sincerus Renatus in 1710, the first known reference to the Rosicrucians as an institution.

Through scholarly research, the interaction of Western Esotericism with the mystical traditions of organized religion has been recognized to be extensive. Further, and less well known, is the often pivotal role esoteric groups and beliefs have had in shaping the modern world as a whole, while remaining "Hidden in Plain Sight."

You are invited to join with other scholars and practitioners within the field of western esotericism in exploring the substantial influence this tradition has on modern thought.

In addition to the opportunity to share research and practices within the realm of western esotericism, the weekend is envisioned as an opportunity to celebrate the many facets of this tradition. Participants are invited to exercise not only their scholarship, but their cultural creativity as well.

The Keynote Address will be given by Dr. Lee Irwin, Ph.D., Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department at the College of Charleston. He is a scholar of world religions with an emphasis on Native American traditions, Western esotericism, hermeticism, contemporary spirituality, mystical cosmology, and transpersonal religious experience as related to dreams and visions. He is the Vice President of the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) and a board member of the Sophia Institute and the Institute for Dream Studies. He has been a workshop leader and group facilitator for over twenty years, particularly in the areas of visionary cosmology and the development of the sacred human. He is the author of many books and articles, including: *The Dream Seekers*, *Visionary Worlds*, *Awakening to Spirit: On Life, Illumination, and Being*, *The Alchemy of Soul*, and *Coming Down From Above: Prophecy, Resistance, and Renewal in Native American Religions*.

Keynote Address: Reincarnation and the Psychonoetic Body in Western Esotericism

This presentation will explore the topic of reincarnation in a historical review extending from Pythagoras to the present. The emphasis of the talk will focus on a variety of theories of reincarnation and the political context within which those theories were developed. He will also address the topic of participatory knowing and the importance of paranormal perceptions as an adjunct to reincarnational theories in western esotericism. Five explicit examples of theories on reincarnation will be presented: Plato, Origen, the Cathars, Jan Baptist van Helmont, and H. Spencer Lewis. Each example will be contextualized by culture and the religious environment to demonstrate issues of contestation or marginalization.

Some of the other Papers currently in preparation for the Conference include: Debby Barret, M.Div., CCHT and Brigitta F. D'Amato, CCHT: "Tracing the Roots of a 20th Century Recovery Phenomenon to the Royal Tombs of Egypt"

Ms Barret and Ms D'Amato are Certified Clinical and Alchemical Hypnotherapists, and Counsellors in the San Francisco Bay Area, and students of Religious Science and Spirituality.

Kathryn LaFevers Evans, M.A.: "Magic & The Binary Code: Renaissance Christian Kabbalah & Buckminster Fuller's Tensegrity Structures" Ms Evans is an independent scholar and practitioner in esotericism, interior & comparative world religions, and comparative literature. She is a member of several associations, including the ASE and the Societas Magica.

John Michael Greer, B.A.: "Nature's Alchemy: The Hermetic Roots of Modern Ecology" Professor Greer is a prolific author and lecturer on occultism, nature

spirituality, and environmental issues, and has served since 2003 as Grand Archdruid of the Ancient Order of Druids in America [AODA].

Dennis William Hauck, Ph.D.: "Materia Prima - The Nature of the First Matter in the Esoteric and Scientific Traditions" Dr. Hauck is a practicing alchemist, author, consultant, and lecturer working to facilitate personal, institutional, and global transformation through the application of the ancient principles of alchemy.

Hugh McCague, Ph.D.: "Florence Nightingale and the Advancement and Spiritualization of the Nursing and Statistics Professions" Dr. McCague teaches at York University in Toronto, and is a student of mysticism, and esotericism in its historical, architectural, artistic and practical manifestations.

Mioara Merié, Ph.D.: "Christian Esotericism and the Inner Eye: Automatic Drawing, Sciences of the Mind, and Religious Innovations in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain" Dr. Merié is a political and cultural analyst and an independent historian currently serving as a political and cultural analyst for the US government.

Kitty Turgeon: "The Influence of the Rosicrucians on the Roycrofters and the Modern Arts and Crafts Movement" Ms Turgeon is Executive Director of the Foundation for the Study of the Arts and Crafts Movement, Vice President for Education of the Roycrofters-at-Large Association, and a recent recipient of the U.S. National Arts & Crafts Conference Lifetime Achievement Award.

Christopher Webster, Ph.D.: "20th Century Photography and Esotericism" A prolific artist, filmmaker, author and lecturer, Dr. Weber holds the position of lecturer in fine art at Aberystwyth University School of Art.

George Young, Ph.D.: "Mystery and Magic in the Caucasus: Esoteric Georgia from Prometheus and Medea to Zviad Gamsakhurdia" Dr. Young has served since 2009 as a Fellow at the Center for Global Humanities, and since 2003, as Adjunct in English and Language Studies, University of New England. He has a profound interest and background in Russian and Eastern European esotericism of the modern period.

Artistic / Interactive Presentations in Preparation:

Maria Butina: "Vibrations: a Journey of Light in Visual Art" Ms Butina is an internationally exhibited visual artist who has held exhibitions in Prague, Split, San Jose and Anaheim. Her art flows from her deep spirituality and mysticism.

Karen Wark, M.A.: "The Mysticism of Jamot's *La Poème de l'âme* (Lyon)" Ms Wark holds an M.A. in Cultural Anthropology from the California Institute of Integral Studies, and serves as Board Secretary of the English Grand Lodge for the Americas of AMORC, and as Program Director at Rosicrucian Park. She is interested in exploring how organizations use the principles of spiritual alchemy to transform themselves.

Christopher Webster, Ph.D.: "A Selection of Short Films on Esoteric Themes" (See above)



Astrologies

Dates: 24-25 July 2010

Location: Bath Royal Scientific and Literary Institute, Bath, England

Sponsoring Organization: The Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture Department of Archaeology, History and Anthropology University of Wales, Lampeter www.lamp.ac.uk/sophia

Call for Papers:

This conference will, for the first time, bring together academics to investigate the theory and practice of astrology in the modern world, from roughly 1700 to the present day.

Astrology is 'the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated' (Patrick Curry). It is a part of modern culture which arouses powerful feelings from loyal devotion to passionate hostility. It is feared by evangelical Christians and despised by sceptical scientists, yet is an unquestioned feature of the popular media. It is described as magic or psychology, and as a path to spiritual understanding or scientific truth, and is often classed as a New Age discipline. It is mentioned in passing in books on the sociology of religion yet is almost completely ignored in the literature on popular culture. Where academic studies do exist they are largely sociological or psychological investigations designed to solve the problem of why belief in astrology persists in the modern world.

Papers may consider

- the life and work of influential astrologers
- the transmission and lineage of ideas
- questions of tradition and innovation
- the relationship of theory to practice
- the cultural context of astrological ideas
- the role and function of astrological practice

While the focus is on the modern west, appropriate papers may be accepted on non-western cultures.

It is expected that most papers will be 20 minutes + 10 minutes questions, although we may accept shorter presentations for reports.

Please send proposals, including a 200 word abstract and 50 word biography, to Dr Nick Champion, n.champion@lamp.ac.uk, by 1 November 2009.

CONFERENCE REPORT

ESSWE

The biennial conference of the European Society for Studies in Western Esotericism was held from July 2nd to 4th in the beautiful and historic city of Strasbourg. A former Imperial Free City which served as a refuge for many heterodox believers in the sixteenth century, Strasbourg was an ideal location for a conference theme of ‘Capitals of European Esotericism and Transcultural Dialogue’.

The papers presented at the conference reflected the wide breadth of geographical locations of esoteric activity, ranging from topics concerning the familiar locales of Strasbourg, Lyon, Paris, Berlin, London, Glastonbury, Prague, Alexandria and Cairo to cities and areas less frequently mentioned but just as rich in esoteric activity: Corfu, the Hague, Moscow, Riga, Halle, Sibiu, Leipzig, Nuremberg, Naples and Damanhur. Also elucidated were locations outside of the physical landmass of the European/Middle-Eastern West but which influenced or were influenced by western esoteric currents: Bombay, Bangalore, and upstate New York State. Conference participants were also given examples of how the qualities of a particular landscape and location can influence the growth and development of both a philosophy of understanding of the natural world and our relationship to it. Imaginary and symbolic landscapes were discussed, such as those found in the writings of Hesse, Eliade, Jung, Bureus, Lovecraft and Illion, as well as the creation of a sacred topography in cyberspace. Finally, an invitation to consider the concept of ‘west’ in western esotericism elicited many thought-provoking comments. One of the dilemmas of conferences such as these is the selection of the sessions one would like to attend. This process invariably entails leaving aside topics that are intriguing, but unfortunately subordinate to those of primary interest. Fortunately, conferences like these also provide many opportunities for continued discussion and exchange of ideas and information outside the formal conference halls. Many thanks to the Germanic Studies Department at the University of Strasbourg and the Maison interuniversitaire des Sciences de l’Homme-Alsace (MISHA) for hosting this event and keeping the cost to participants so reasonable.
Cecile Wilson, M.A. University of Exeter (Western Esotericism)



ARTICLES

The concept 'Occultism' and H. P. Blavatsky

by Tim Rudbøg, © 2009

Definitions of Occultism

The term 'occultism' is a key term in the academic study of esotericism which is why I thought it might be interesting to take a closer look at the term here. 'Occultism' is usually used in one of the following ways:

1. Everything which is supernatural. This is the general popular notion of the term.
2. A bi-product of society or rejected knowledge. This is how scholars such as James Webb and Marcello Truzzi used the term or its equivalent 'the occult' in the nineteen seventies.
3. A generic term for the occult sciences, such as alchemy and astrology. This goes back to Agrippa's *Occulta Philosophia* and later to Eliphas Levi's work.
4. As a term for modern secularized esotericism – this is how Wouter J. Hanegraaff has constructed the term.

As we shall see the substantive 'occultism' is however not very old and was introduced into English by H. P. Blavatsky and other occultists such as Emma Hardinge Britten. Blavatsky was thus one of the first to use the term in English, this short article will therefore attempt to draw some attention to how she actually used the term.

As is quite well known H. P. Blavatsky (1831-1891)¹ was one of the major innovators of esotericism and occultism during the 19th century. In this article I will primarily focus on how she understood and defined the term in her work "Isis Unveiled" (1877), and in three articles from 1888: Conversations on Occultism², Practical Occultism,³ and Occultism Versus the Occult Arts.⁴

1[1] H. P. Blavatsky will from now on be named: HPB.

2[2] See, HPB, Collected Writings, Vol. IX, p. 99. This will from now on be referred to as CW.

3[3] See, HPB, CW vol. IX, p. 155.

4[4] See, HPB, CW vol. IX, p. 249.

HPB has from an *etic*⁵ perspective been classified as an occultist, which in Hanegraaff's and Faivre's view generally means: any esotericist who tries to understand and adapt esotericism to the newly arisen disenchanted and secular world view especially after the industrialization or the 19th century.⁶

This article does, however, as mentioned above seek to take a look at the original *emic*⁷ dimension or of how HPB, the occultist, herself understood occultism. It is thus mainly a presentation of *emic* material intended to show how occultism slowly evolved into an understanding of itself as an 'ethical path' or 'way of life' rather than an umbrella term for various 'secret sciences' or 'sciences which deal with the secrets of nature' which the term traditionally signified among esotericists, such as Eliphas Levi.

HPB's Initial Definition of Occultism

HPB writes that "...the prisms through which Occultism appears, to those innocent of the philosophy, are as multicoloured and varied as human fancy can make them."⁸ In the following I thus intend to show how 'true' occultism was understood by HPB in her latter days.

In HPB's first major work "Isis Unveiled" (1877) we find the following definition given: "Occultism embraces the whole range of psychological, physiological, cosmical, physical, and spiritual phenomena. From the word *occult*, hidden or secret; applying therefore to the study of the *Kabala*, astrology, alchemy, and all arcane sciences."⁹

This early definition of occultism, early since the substantive occultism was not in use before Eliphas Levi (1810 - 1875), is much in line with the *De Occulta Philosophia* of Agrippa, a sort of synthesis term for all the sciences, which both are secret and deal with the secret forces in nature. Agrippa, however, did not use the substantive occultism but only the adjective.

From HPB's above definition or specification of the substantive occultism, we find a consensus with the French occult tradition of Eliphas Levi, whom HPB read and introduced to the English speaking world by using and discussing many of his writings throughout her own work. Eliphas Levi most likely coined the substantive occultism in order to have an overall term that included or embrace all the classical occult arts and sciences such as Alchemy, Astrology, Magic, Kabbalah and Geomancy etc.

5[5] Meaning from the perspective or category of the neutral historian-observer.

6[6] See, Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, pp. 409, 422-423, 448. Faivre, *Questions of Terminology*, p. 8.

7[7] Meaning from the view of the subject, person or group studied.

8[8] HPB, *CW*, Vol. IX, p. 249.

9[9] HPB, *Isis Unveiled*, Vol. 1, p. XXXVII.

However, it seems that this first use of the term occultism was later modified or perhaps specified. In 1888 HPB argues that occultism, *sui generis*, is more than just the “occult arts” or secret sciences thus making a distinction between the “occult arts” and occultism.

HPB writes “...Occultism differs from Magic and other secret Sciences as the glorious sun differs from a rush-light, as the immutable and immortal Spirit of Man—the reflection of the absolute, causeless and unknowable ALL—differs from the mortal clay—the human body.”¹⁰ Occultism still embraces the “occult arts” as HPB wrote in 1877 and as Eliphas Levi held, but in itself it is something more. It is something which animates these sciences as spirit animates the body.

Occultism itself came to be viewed as a force, symbolised by a gate, which one enters into, but only passes through or encompass in ones being if one has purified the “animal soul” and killed out all desire for selfish gain, or as HPB writes: “...remember always, that *true Occultism or Theosophy* is the “Great Renunciation of SELF”. It is ALTRUISM ...”Not for himself, but for the world, he lives,” as soon as he has pledged himself to the work...his personality must disappear, and he has to become a *mere beneficent force in Nature*.”¹¹ Here occultism is correlated with HPB’s usage of the term theosophy as a divine wisdom and is transformed into a *spiritual practice* through which one has to purify that aspect within the psychology of man in which desire for selfish gain is seated.

It this later definition or specification of the nature of ‘true’ occultism, occultism becomes an ethical and moral attainment or advancement which only can be reached by purification of the animal aspects of the *personality* through proper instruction and thus through initiation. This ‘true’ sort of occultism is not for everyone, but only for the few who willingly take up the challenge of walking the sacrificial straight way and thus lead the life to light, as HPB argues.

If man has not purified his passionate and lustful nature his use of the “occult arts”, which is only the body or vehicle of occultism, will be for selfish gain, which in esoteric and symbolic terminology is called the ‘left hand path’ or ‘black magic’. One path leads to life and light for all and the other leads to death and darkness.

The “occult arts” are in themselves presented as mere value free tools which can be used for the common good (spiritual aspect) or for selfish gain (material aspect), just as science, philosophy and religion can, as is easily seen through the events of history.

We also find this double sided use in the classical occult science alchemy which in its spiritual aspect was used for transmutation into a higher state of life and in its lower aspect was used for making material gold in order to gain earthly riches.

¹⁰[10] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, p. 250.

¹¹[11] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, p. 254.

The “occult arts” are thus used according to the user or the motivation of the entity directing it by his will.

HPB further writes: “How ... can it be possible for a man to enter the “straight gate” of occultism when his daily living and hourly thoughts are bound up with worldly things, desires of possession and power, with lust, ambition and duties, which, however honourable, are still of the earth earthy?”¹²

‘True’ occultism in HPB’s view is not just that one is fascinated with the occult and reads interesting occult books, it is an ‘ethical path’ or ‘spiritual practice’ which has to become, as HPB demandingly writes, “everything or nothing”¹³ meaning that one must live it fully if one is to touch it at all.

She further writes: “The aspirant has to choose absolutely between the life of the world and the life of Occultism. It is useless and vain to endeavour to unite the two, for no one can serve two masters and satisfy both.”¹⁴ and “... as well said by one believed to have sacrificed himself for humanity—“narrow is the gate and straight the way that leadeth unto life” eternal, and there “few be they that find it.”¹⁵

In HPB’s understanding of occultism the “occult arts” and magic are not primary – it is knowledge of the soul which is primary since it leads to the straight way of love and not into the pit of misused power.

HPB thus advises the student of occultism not to pursue the “occult arts” but rather Atma-Vidya that means knowledge of the soul or spirit. Knowledge of the soul is perceived to be what lifts man out of his lower constitution (or egotistic animal part) into the higher life meaning the more ethical life and pure life since the soul is the loving and higher aspect of man’s constitution according to theosophy.

HPB specifies that there are four aspects of occultism or kinds of “esoteric knowledge” using eastern Sanskrit terminology: 1. Yajna-Vidya, 2. Mahavidya, 3. Guhya-Vidya and 4. Atma-Vidya.

“(1) *Yajña-Vidya*, knowledge of the occult powers awakened in Nature by the performance of certain religious ceremonies and rites. (2) *Mahavidya*, the “great knowledge,” the magic of the Kabalists and of the *Tantrika* worship, often Sorcery of the worst description. (3) *Guhya-Vidya*, knowledge of the mystic powers residing in Sound (Ether), hence in the Mantras (chanted prayers or incantations) and depending on the

¹²[12] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, p. 257.

¹³[13] HPB, Inner Group Teachings, p. 1.

¹⁴[14] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, p. 258.

¹⁵[15] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, p. 260.

rhythm and melody used; in other words a magical performance based on Knowledge of the Forces of Nature and their correlation; and (4) ATMA-VIDYA, a term which is translated simply “knowledge of the Soul,” *true Wisdom* by the Orientalists, but which means far more. This last is the only kind of Occultism that any theosophist who admires *Light on the Path*, and who would be wise and unselfish, ought to strive after.”¹⁶

This short article has now come to an end, but I hope to have shown how occultism as it was understood by HPB in her latter days became a ‘spiritual practice’ which involved the whole life of the practitioner rather than just the “occult arts” themselves. I think that this *emic* understanding of occultism has some important implications for a further and broader understanding of what the *etic* category *occultism* entails, or in other words for an understanding of what happened during this specific historical ‘disenchanted’ period, especially considering the fact that occultism in part was a reaction against the materialistic - positivistic disinterested and objective study of the world, not only by attempting to merge the natural science of the day or scientism in general with esotericism or a vitalistic understanding of the universe, but by reasserting that a ‘true’ study of the world entails first of all a spiritual elevation of the potentiality of man’s soul as the ‘philosophical life’ of antiquity once did.

After thought:

Here are some APHORISMS by HPB from *Lucifer*, Vol. I, No. 1, September, 1887, p. 7 on Occultism which will demonstrate the point I have tried to make in this article::

"Occultism is not magic, though magic is one of its tools."

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"Occultism is not the acquirement of powers, whether psychic or intellectual, though both are its servants. Neither is occultism the pursuit of happiness; as men understand the word; for the first step is sacrifice, the second, renunciation."

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"Occultism is the science of life, the art of living."

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¹⁶[16] HPB, CW, Vol. IX, pp. 251-252.

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